

Fisher Building  
343 South Dearborn Street  
Chicago  
Cook County  
Illinois

HABS No. ILL-1082

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PHOTOGRAPHS  
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey  
National Park Service  
Office of Archeology and Historic Preservation  
801 19th Street, N.W.  
Washington, D. C.

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

HABS NO. ILL-1082

THE FISHER BUILDING

Location: 343 South Dearborn Street (bounded on three sides by South Dearborn Street to the west, West VanBuren Street to the south, and Plymouth Place to the east); Chicago, Cook County, Illinois.

Present Owner: Ethel Fisher Dixon et al.

Present Use: Shops on the first floor; office tenants above.

Statement of Significance: The Fisher Building is a large office building designed by the firm of D. H. Burnham & Co. in 1895. It has been cited by the Chicago Landmarks Commission and it is indicative of the level of achievement in skyscraper design attained by the architects of the Chicago School. The steel cage structure is sheathed in a curtain wall of decorative terra cotta and glass, providing ample space and light for the occupants, and making it possible for the building to be erected relatively quickly and economically.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Original and subsequent owners: Legal description of the property: Lots 24, 19, 18 (the last is the site for the 1907 addition to the north) in G.W. Snow's Subdivision of Block 139 in School Section Addition to Chicago of Section 16-39-14.

The following is based on the complete chain of title contained in Book 468A in the Office of the Cook County Recorder: Lucius G. Fisher, the original owner of the building bearing his name, leased lot 24 and the south half of 19 from John D. Jennings on November 1, 1881 (Document 388262); the north half of 19 was subsequently leased f. Jennings (Document 843365). The ownership of the property is mentioned in Jennings' inventory of June 24, 1889, (Document S2/260), as is Fisher's lease in his inventory of August 24, 1916 (Document 1S7/434). Lot 18 was owned by Anna M. Bailey in 1891, when she leased it to Charles C. Heisen on March 2 (Document 1568458). Anna Bailey, Charles Heisen, Owen F. Aldis, Lucius G. Fisher, and Francis Peabody are all mentioned in the transactions leading to Fisher's leasehold obtained on May 15, 1905 (Documents 1568458, 3697715-16, 3700416-17).

Fisher's lease on lot 18 is mentioned in his inventory, previously cited, as is Anna Bailey's ownership in her inventory of February 6, 1908 (Document 99/7). The leasehold and ownership has since passed through a variety of trusts and combinations; the last owner of all three lots is recorded to be Ethel Dixon et al, November 1, 1956 (Documents 16743873-74).

2. Date of erection: July 3, 1895 - May 1, 1896.
3. Architects: D. H. Burnham & Co.; E. C. Shankland, engineer.
4. Original plans, construction, etc.: Randall, p. 143: "A unique feature was the use of 25' piles under the spread foundations in order to consolidate the soil; and the use on that account of a higher soil pressure, 6,000 pounds per square foot. Gray steel columns were used and girder wind bracing."

A very thorough contemporary account of the construction of the Fisher Building and a complete description with photographs are found in the article "The Fisher Building, Chicago--A Building without Walls", Inland Architect, 27:4 (May, 1896), pp. 41-48. Below is a synopsis of the article:

The writer states: "But here, for what we believe to be the first time in human experience, one of the highest commercial buildings in the world has been erected almost without any bricks. It fronts on three streets, and on the remaining side adjoins other property. The fronts are covered with cellular terra cotta on the outside, not in imitation of a wall, but following upward the steel supporting members, and closing in the transoms between the windows, leaving two-thirds of the exterior to be enclosed by glass..." Thus, the building is covered in a thin skin of terra cotta, a curtain wall: "Only two bricklayers were employed at any time in this part of the work" (The backing of the terra cotta fronts with brick).

Dimensions: 70'6" front on VanBuren Street; 100' fronts on Dearborn Street and Plymouth Place; 235 feet high; 18 stories and an attic; basement 3' below the sewer level of adjoining streets. There is one additional story on the north end to accommodate the elevators. 1,960,000' cubic area; cost approximately \$575,000 or 30 cents per square foot.

Plan: short T-shaped corridors; all offices have exterior light. Ground floor is subdivided into shops, corridors from the three surrounding streets leading to elevators. The second floor is devoted to a banking room. "Six swift-

running hydraulic passenger elevators of the most modern type, connect the eighteen stories in the shortest possible time."

Construction: The entire building is fireproof--all steel work protected with hollow fireclay tile; floors of similar material, being flat arches. Floors finished in marble mosaic in the halls; white maple in the rooms; inside finish is of polished mahogany; all halls are marble wainscoted 7' high with veined Italian marble. Construction was carried out by the Guaranty Construction Company of Chicago.

The writer says this of the building's "style": "A description of such a building cannot be complete without some allusion to the architecture. It would be an injustice to the progressive originality of a designer to attempt to show that a building filling all modern demands for utility is subservient to any of the historical styles. Style cannot dominate the design of any such structure, and the most that an architect can do is to consistently follow a style of decoration most in harmony with the general arrangement of the exterior which the construction itself has dominated. In such a building proportions of doors and windows cannot be considered, any more than the proportions of the whole. The task is therefore the more difficult to combine the necessity for covering the structural parts with some form of artistic expression. This is seen in the details of the first and second stories, where motives taken from the fifteenth century Gothic of Rouen and Burges have been used with good results. All the minuter details of the interior in the ornamental iron, mosaics, hardware and gas fixtures have been similarly carried out. The terra cotta of the front tells what it is and does not presume to imitate stone. It is of a pale salmon color and has a spattered surface which adds much to its effect."

The following is a time-table of the actual construction:

1895	June 27	Contract signed
	July 3	Ground broken
	August	Commenced driving piles and commenced steel foundation over piles and concrete.
	Sept.	Piling concrete and steel foundation completed.
	Oct. 3	First piece of vertical steel skeleton started.
	Oct. 12	First floor beams all set.
	Nov. 12	Highest piece of steel on building set.
	Nov. 25	Roof set and under waterproof cover.
	Dec. 10	All hollow tile floor arches set.

Dec. 12 Contract let for interior marble work.  
Dec. 25 Contract let for glass mosaic ceilings.

1896

Jan. 2 Complete detail drawing for interior marble work received.  
Apr. 23 First tenant moved in.  
May 1 Marble and mosaic contracts completed and building ready for all tenants.

It is pointed out that despite the apparent rapidity of the construction work, there were delays: in September, 1895, due to the failure to receive necessary structural steel; October, five days lost to bad weather, making the total time for setting the 19 stories 26 days (in one 14-day period, 13 stories were set).

No overtime or night work was done.

"If asked, 'How could this be done' We can only say that careful attention to details and intelligent division of labor have led to the result. There could be no mistakes under such a system. But there was a second cause of delay, and that was due to the fact that changes made in the first-story corridors by the owner led to the redesigning of the whole of that part of the work, and all of the materials had to be got out after January 1."

The steel frame: "The entire structure is supported on skeleton steel columns, which are riveted together so as to be continuous from bottom to the top. These came together, just as they were fitted in the shop, in such a perfect way as to contribute more than anything else to the rigidity of the construction." Mr. Shankland, one of D. H. Burnham's partners is mentioned as intending to write a description of the steel work.

Contractors (all have advertisements following): Pioneer Fireproof Construction Company: "hard-burned fire-clay tile from their own clay beds at Ottawa"; 206 car loads, weighing 3,620 tons.

Northwestern Terra Cotta Company of Chicago: exterior, except 10 stories of north wall which are hollow building tile "The new process of finely spattering the terra cotta before burning in has been used throughout."

Rittenhouse & Embree Company: Hardwood flooring - 120,000' of kiln-dried polished maple.

Evans Marble Company: 40,000 square feet of marble; veined Italian marble wainscoting from Carrara, first floor of Italian Pavonazzo.

Frank L. Davis: Designed and finished the mosaics.

Winslow Brothers Company: Ornamental iron in blue-black finish (Bower-Barff process).

L. H. Prentice Company: Steam-heating work; Johnson Temperature Controlling Company: heat regulation.

Grimshaw Company and General Electric: Electric mains, electrical fixtures by Chicago Edison Company.

P & F. Corbin: Hardware.

Alfred Barker: Tinting and house painting.

List of photographs accompanying the article:

- p. 41 VanBuren St. Entrance.
- p. 44 Plymouth Place Entrance.  
Dearborn Street Entrance.
- p. 45 View of building from southwest upon completion
- p. 46 The first floor on October 12, 1895.  
The Highest Point Reached, view of steel cage, November 12, 1895.  
Similar view, December 12, 1895.  
The unfinished First Story Corridor, March 13, 1896.
- p. 47 Looking Down Corridor from VanBuren Street Entrance.  
The Finished First Story Corridor, May 1, 1896.
- p. 48 Treatment of Elevator Enclosures.

Structural Details:

- p. 48 Typical plan of Bay Window.  
Typical Section of North Wall.  
Typical Plan of North Wall.

5. Alterations and Additions:

In 1907 a two-bay addition, 20 stories and a basement, was built to the north of the original building. While sharing the original Gothic decorative detailing, the addition has a planar wall, as opposed to the original bay-built on rock caissons; Peter J. Weber was the architect; E. C. and R. M. Shankland were the engineers. (Randall, p. 143).

B. Bibliography:

Clippings filed under Chicago, Illinois, Fisher Building in Burnham Library, Art Institute of Chicago.

Condit, Carl W. The Chicago School of Architecture, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1964, p. 113, Fig. 68.

"The Fisher Building, Chicago--A Building without Walls," Inland Architect, XXVII,4 (May, 1896), pp. 41-48.

"The Fisher Office Building, Chicago, Illinois, D. H. Burnham and Co., Architects," Inland Architect, XXV (June, 1895). Pl. fol. 48. Photograph of original perspective rendering.

Randall, Frank A. History of the Development of Building Construction in Chicago. Urbana: The University of Illinois Press, 1949, pp. 93, 143. Bibl.

Scrapbook of news items, building data, personal notes concerning Mr. Fisher given to the Chicago Chapter AIA by a relative of the original owner. (Reported in HABS Form, November 30, 1960, by John D. Randall).

Siegel, Arthur, ed. Chicago's Famous Buildings. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1965, pp. 117-119. Photographs and plans.

Old View of the Fisher Building upon completion, in the Photograph Collection of the Ryerson Library of the Art Institute of Chicago.

PART II ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: The Fisher Building is a large office building designed by the firm of D. H. Burnham & Co. in 1895. It has been cited by the Chicago Landmarks Commission and it is indicative of the level of achievement in skyscraper design attained by the architects of the Chicago School. The steel cage structure is sheathed in a curtain wall of decorative terra cotta and glass, providing ample space and light for the occupants and making it possible for the building to be erected relatively quickly and economically.
2. Condition of fabric: Good.

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Over-all dimensions: Rectangular 70'-6" (five-bay south front) x 150' 0" (eleven-bay west front), including addition. Eighteen stories.
2. Wall construction, finish and color: The original block of the building had tripartite projecting bays alternating with planed surfaces. Bays end at sill of 17th story. Arches of varying width span the window openings of the 17th floor. The original salmon terra cotta finish is now coated with a black patina from the soot and dirt of the city.
3. Openings:
  - a. Doorways and doors: The arched entrance on Van-Buren Street, originally the principal entrance, is intact; that at 343 South Dearborn Street has received a 20th century "modernization"--a polished granite portal with plate glass and aluminum doors. The original doors from the vestibule inside are decorated with an ornamental fish cut in the glass panels.
  - b. Windows: Mostly one-over-one light, double-hung windows; those of the original building are grouped three to a bay window, two between; in the north addition, the windows are placed in a plane in groups of three. At the 17th floor the lights are gathered under wide arches; at the 18th they are again in threes with transoms above. The first floor display windows have been disfigured by a variety of signs, aluminum panels, and other attempts at commercial modernization.



4. Roof:

- a. Shape, covering: Flat, built-up roofing.
- b. Cornice, eaves: Projecting ornamental cornice.

C. Description of Interiors:

- 1. General: The main floor lobby has been remodelled with plain marble floors, wall trim, and a plaster ceiling. The original mosaic floors and ceilings may be seen in a small hall at the north end of the lobby and on the second floor.
- 2. Decorative features and trim: The building remains one of few in Chicago still to employ open ornamental iron grillwork in the elevator shafts.

D. Site and Surroundings:

General setting and orientation: The building occupies the southern portion of a narrow block at the south end of the Loop. Its neighbors are the Old Colony Building (HABS No. ILL-1053) to the south and the Monadnock Building (HABS NO. ILL-1027) to the west. The building fronts the sidewalk line on three sides and is adjacent to the elevated on VanBuren Street.

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National Park Service  
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